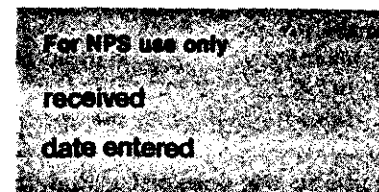


United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination FormSee instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections**1. Name**

historic Ambassador Theater Building

and/or common

2. Location

street & number 411 North Seventh Street

___ not for publication

city, town St. Louis

___ vicinity of

state Missouri

code 29

county City of St. Louis

code 510

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
___ district	___ public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	___ agriculture	___ museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	___ unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial	___ park
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	___ educational	___ private residence
___ site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	___ entertainment	___ religious
___ object	N/A in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	___ government	___ scientific
	___ being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial	___ transportation
		___ no	___ military	___ other:

4. Owner of Property

name Barket, Levy, Fine, Inc.

street & number 411 North Seventh Street

city, town St. Louis

___ vicinity of

state MO 63101

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. St. Louis City Hall

street & number Tucker Boulevard at Market Street

city, town St. Louis

state MO 63103

6. Representation in Existing Surveystitle 1. Landmark of the City of St. Louis has this property been determined eligible? ___ yes ☒ no

date September 1978

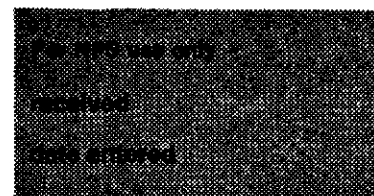
___ federal ☒ state ___ county ☒ localdepository for survey records Heritage & Urban Design Commission
Room 416 City Hall

city, town St. Louis

state MO 63103

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**



Continuation sheet Ambassador Theater & Building Item number 6

Page 1

2. Architectural Survey of the Central Business District
October 1975; revised, April 1977 and February 1982
Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc.
706 Chestnut Street, Room 1217
St. Louis,

Local

MO 63101

3. Missouri State Historical Survey
Historic Preservation Program
Missouri Department of Natural Resources
P. O. Box 176
Jefferson City,

State

MO 65102

7. Description

Condition

☐ excellent
☒ good
☐ fair

☐ deteriorated
☐ ruins
☐ unexposed

Check one

☐ unaltered
☒ altered

Check one

☒ original site
☐ moved

date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Located on the northwest corner of Locust and Seventh Streets in downtown St. Louis, the Ambassador Theater Building is a seventeen-story office building incorporating a six-story theater. The building was designed by Chicago architects C. W. and George L. Rapp and was completed in 1926.

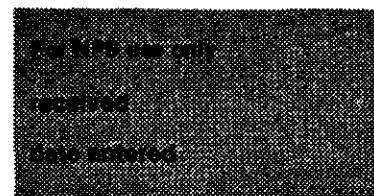
Constructed with a steel frame and reinforced concrete, the building is faced with buff brick; it extends fourteen bays on Locust Street and eighteen bays on Seventh Street. (Photo #1) The lower five stories (housing the theater) are demarked by terra cotta ornament designed with Renaissance motifs. Six monumental windows exhibiting lavish ornament open to the mezzanine level of the lobby on the south elevation. (Photo #2) Terra cotta ornament on the east elevation is more subdued, restricted to spandrels displaying sphinx and urns. A terra cotta cornice featuring griffins caps the south and east elevations. The office building, entered from Seventh Street, contains an original elevator lobby finished in floor to ceiling panels of richly veined black and white marble. The only significant alteration to the exterior has been the modification of street level storefronts on both the south and east elevations. The bricked-in windows on the sixth story of the south elevation are indicated for the projection room of the theater on the original plans.

Entrances to the theater are located at the corner. The two-story lobby extends east/west along the south (Locust Street) elevation. Large piers (embellished with low-relief plaster ornament fashioned into nymphs, urns and armorial designs) rise from marble-faced bases to the ceiling; the piers divide the lobby space into a central area with promenade aisles on the first floor and mezzanine level. Both the piers and lobby ceiling (also employing decorative plaster) are painted in muted shades of metallic green, bronze, silver and rose. (Photo #3) An ornamental brass railing (featuring a dolphin motif) encloses the mezzanine and is installed on stairways leading to the mezzanine and balcony. The metal work was executed by Rogers-Schmitt Wire & Iron Company of St. Louis. Ornate chandeliers of filigree metal, crystal and colored glass are suspended from the ceiling to the lobby. (Photo #3) Two cast iron drinking fountains supported by bacchic herms are installed at the east and west ends of the mezzanine. A temporary intrusion of dry-wall construction now exists on the main floor of the lobby. It was constructed to enlarge the retail space northward off a Locust Street store.

Entrance to the 54,000 square foot auditorium is gained through doors on the north side of the lobby. A mezzanine and balcony are cantilevered out from the south wall of the auditorium. Due to inadequate light it was not possible to photograph the auditorium; however, a careful comparison of Photo #4 (circa 1926) with the auditorium today reveals virtually no significant alterations to the design of the space or to the decoration. All features visible in Photo #4 survive with the exception of the organ, the seats on the first floor and the center stage curtains. Decorative motifs of nymphs, dolphins and arms introduced in the lobby are continued and expanded in the auditorium in high- and low-relief plaster covering the walls and ceiling. The ornamental plaster work in both the lobby and auditorium was the work of a St. Louis firm, John R. Rowan Plastering Company; the models were executed by Victor Berlendis, architectural sculptor. Predominate colors employed are

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Continuation sheet Ambassador Building, St. Louis item number 7

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burgundry red, silvery turquoise, gold and silver. Enriched with plaster sunburst rays, two of eleven atmospheric ceiling domes are visible at the top of Photo #4. Originally the domes were lighted in blue to give the illusion of open sky.

The only notable physical damage to the auditorium has been minor water damage on the flat surfaces of the ceiling causing some paint and plaster to peel. Other modifications have been the enlargement of the stage to the south and the installation of a new projection room on the first floor, neither of which has caused any noticeable disturbance to significant features.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1925-26 Builder/Architect Rapp & Rapp, architects

Statement of Significance (In one paragraph)

The Ambassador Theater Building qualifies for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C, and is eligible under the following area of significance: ARCHITECTURE: Completed in 1926, the Ambassador Theater is the work of Chicago architects C. W. and George L. Rapp, nationally prominent designers of theater and office buildings. The exterior of the seventeen story, steel structure is faced with buff brick and features richly modelled, Renaissance ornament in terra cotta on the lower stories and cornice. Anchoring the corner of Seventh and Locust Streets in the heart of the Central Business District, the building completed Seventh Street's prestigious corridor of office buildings which began development with the Wainwright Building two blocks south of the Ambassador. The first six stories house downtown St. Louis' only surviving luxury movie palace, originally constructed with three thousand seats and reported in 1926 to be the most costly theater built to date. Inactive since 1976, the theater's elaborate "Spanish festival" program of decoration in the lobby and auditorium along with the eleven-dome atmospheric ceiling survives with little alteration.

The phenomenal growth and popularity of the American motion picture industry in the first quarter of the twentieth century created a new role for theater architects as designers of environments of entertainment in "the box office, in the lobby, the foyer, the rest rooms, and the auditorium."¹ The importance of the theater building itself as a contributing factor to the commercial success of motion pictures was illuminated by architect C. W. Rapp in 1925, the year the Rapp Brothers designed St. Louis' luxurious Ambassador Theater:

Watch the eyes of a child as it enters the portals of our great theaters and treads the pathway into fairyland. Watch the bright light in the eyes of the tired shopgirl as she walks amid furnishings that once delighted the hearts of queens. See the toil-worn father whose dreams have never come true and look inside his heart as he finds strength and rest within the theater. There you have the answer to why motion picture theaters are so palatial. . . . These are not impractical attempts at showing off. . . . These are part of a celestial city where iridescent lights and luxurious fittings heighten the expectation of pleasure. It is richness unabashed, but richness with a reason.²

In addition to benefits of the social philosophy espoused by the new theater palaces where luxury was accessible to all for a single price of sixty-five cents and the "wealthy rub elbows with the poor,"³ the construction of the Ambassador Theater in downtown St. Louis was heralded as a great "civic institution" with broad implications for the city. When the theater opened in August 1926, it was reported that never before had the business community as a whole given support to an event through

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received
date entered

Continuation sheet Ambassador Theater & Building Item number 8

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newspaper advertising, personal publicity, window displays and sponsorship of street decorations and a grand parade. Promoted as the "greatest event in St. Louis since the World's Fair," the opulence of the Ambassador was expected to boost tourism while promising a much-needed boon to the night life of the city as well as drawing "thousands" of afternoon shoppers. The development of a competing commercial and entertainment center along Grand Avenue in Midtown was indeed good reason for downtown merchants to cheer the Ambassador as a "milestone in our progress" which could reverse the tides of fortune and bring the city to a "flood stage" of prosperity. The St. Louis Star explained:

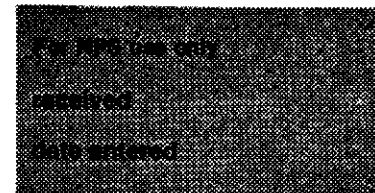
Business men of St. Louis have never forgiven themselves for allowing the Great White Way of St. Louis to be established along Grand Avenue. They hail the opening of the Ambassador as the initial step in transplanting this effervescent spirit of joy and gaiety into the downtown business district.⁴

While the six-story theater inspired the most extravagant praise, the significance of the eleven-story superstructure of office space was not overlooked by the press. Scheduled to open October 1, 1926, the office building was predicted to be a "popular address" because of its strategic location and the rich architectural treatment of the building. The buff brick exterior featured a cornice and lower stories embellished with "modern Renaissance" designs in terra cotta. Monumental windows opening to the lobby displayed Winkle terra cotta motifs described as the "largest detail of its kind" built in St. Louis. It was also noted that one of the largest steel trusses in the world supported the roof of the theater auditorium and the eleven stories above. Commanding a prime corner site at Seventh and Locust Streets, the Ambassador Building was at the "geographic center of the downtown. . . handy to every other large office building," the financial district to the east and the Custom House and Post Office to the west. Principal streetcar and bus lines were nearby, along with abundant parking. Imported marbles in the office building lobby would lend an "aristocratic atmosphere" while generous five-foot windows in each office were designed to provide plentiful light and air. It was announced that sixty percent of the space was already leased; Westinghouse Electric Company had leased the entire sixteenth floor and Equitable Life Insurance Company, the fifteenth floor.⁵

The entrepreneurs responsible for the construction of the Ambassador Building, Skouras Brothers Enterprises, occupied lavish offices (complete with projection rooms and a gymnasium) on the seventh floor of the new building. A family triumvirate of theater management, Charles, Spyros and George Skouras emigrated to St. Louis as teen-agers from a small farming community in Greece. Eldest brother Charles, who arrived in the city in 1908, saved earnings made as a busboy at the Hotel Jefferson to bring his two younger brothers to St. Louis. By 1914, the three brothers owned and operated thirty-five neighborhood theaters in addition to the larger Grand Central and Missouri Theaters. Eventually, all three brothers achieved national prominence in the film industry: Charles became President of Fox West Coast; Spyros, President of 20th Century Fox; and George, Chairman of the Board of United Artists.⁶

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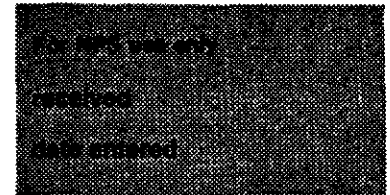
C. W. Rapp (d. 1926) and George L. Rapp (1878-1941), architects of the Ambassador Theater, were among the nation's most successful designers of movie palaces. Born in Carbondale, Illinois, the brothers were sons of an architect. After establishing a practice in Chicago, the Rapp Brothers (in 1906) began designing movie theaters and received commissions for several of Chicago's largest movie palaces (including the Chicago, Tivoli and Uptown), the Paramount Theater in New York City and numerous other theaters in the midwest. Their work also included large business and commercial buildings. Educated at the University of Illinois and abroad, George Rapp achieved recognition for his design of the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. and served as Consulting Architect for New York City's "Radio City."⁷

The Rapp Brothers' ability to create what clients wanted, "a grand plan executed with taste,"⁸ was demonstrated in their program of decoration for the Ambassador. Variouslly described as fairyland, paradise and dreamland, the interior of the theater invited the public to pass "thru the magic door that separates the bustling city from wonderland." Departing from the architects' often-used Louis XIV mode, the prevailing style of the Ambassador was described as Spanish Renaissance. It was reported that the architects did not copy a particular style of Spanish building, but endeavored to "symbolize the spirit of a Spanish festival such as was held during the fifteenth century." The two elaborate chandeliers suspended from the lobby ceiling conveyed the "Moorish and Oriental influence in Spanish art." In the auditorium walls in "brilliant and bizarre tones" and figures in bold relief expressed the Spanish carnival atmosphere while the spectacular "hanging ceiling" comprised of eleven silver-leafed domes with sunburst motifs recalled the architects' French Sun King mode.⁹

In contrast to the city's other Rapp-designed theater, the St. Louis (1925) on Grand Avenue which was considered a "low-budget" project, no expense was spared for the Ambassador. The \$3,650,000 cost of erecting the theater alone was announced as averaging more per seat than any other theater in the world, exceeding by twenty percent the new Metropolitan Opera House and also outdistancing the extravagant Uptown Theater in Chicago.¹⁰ Deluxe in every way, the theater was fitted with the most up-to-date mechanical systems including intricate lights controlled by the "largest major type switchboard ever constructed," an elevating orchestra pit and the "world's largest" air cooling system (designed by W. H. Carrier of Newark, New Jersey) which maintained a year-round temperature of 72 degrees. The Skouras Brothers' concept of theater management also placed great importance on service to their "guests." Courtesy extended to theater patrons worn out from the day's toil could place them in a "frame of mind to really enjoy the show." To insure the best in service, the Skouras Brothers dispatched the Ambassador's manager to usher in the Chicago Theater in order to learn the "good points of their system." Thirty-seven Ambassador ushers, trained in first aid and fire drills, were given "military drill so they could stand properly, walk with snap and ginger and perform their duties with the proper gracefulness."¹¹

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During the early years of the theater's use, stage shows and musical entertainment were added attractions to the movie presentations. The Skouras Brothers' Missouri Rocket girls (later the Radio City Rockettes) performed opening night which was attended by movie magnates from New York and Hollywood. Charles Previn, "stolen" from Florenz Ziegfield in New York, was hired as musical director and Stuart Barrie, educated at the London Royal Academy and a student of Claude Debussy, played the gold-finished Wurlitzer organ--the largest yet constructed. Among the dozens of celebrities who performed on the Ambassador stage were the budding Ginger Rogers, Bing Crosby, and (in later years) Bob Hope, Bill Cosby, Charley Rich, Cheech and Chong and the Jefferson Starship.

In 1929, the Ambassador was one of sixty-seven movie theaters listed by the St. Louis City Directory; the two important concentrations were in Midtown and the Central Business District. By 1966, the number of active theaters had plummeted to twenty-one--a mortality rate underscored by a reporter's pity observation that "theaters don't die in St. Louis, they become parking lots."¹² Today less than a dozen survive and the Ambassador is one of the three surviving movie palaces from the "Golden Age" and the only luxury theater in the Central Business District. Although the doors of the theater have been closed since the late 1970s, the interior, fortunately, has suffered little alteration or irreversible physical deterioration. The eleven floors of office space are in good condition and enjoy a high rate of occupancy. In recent years the renovation and reuse of two Midtown theaters on Grand Avenue, Rapp & Rapp's St. Louis Theater (now Powell Symphony Hall) and the "Fabulous Fox" (adapted as live theater) have attracted national publicity and provided successful models for salvaging historic theaters. With the asset of being located in an architecturally significant commercial building in its own right, it is hoped that the Ambassador Theater can be returned to its original stature and use as a commercially viable civic institution.

FOOTNOTES

¹S. L. (Roxy) Rothafel, "The Architect and the Box Office," The Architectural Forum 57 (September 1932): 194.

²Ben Hall, The Best Remaining Seats (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1961), p.136, cited by Noelle Soren, "Four Theaters in St. Louis" (Term paper, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1974).

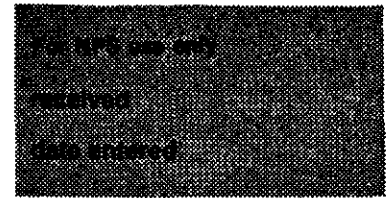
³Ibid.

⁴"New Ambassador Office Building Will Open Oct. 1," St. Louis Star, Special Supplement, 25 August 1926.

⁵Ibid.

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National Park Service**

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⁶St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2 January 1944; 23 October 1954; 17 September 1961; and 17 March 1964.

⁷Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased) (Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Co, 1956; facsimile ed., Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970), p. 497.

⁸Grandnephew C. W. Rapp as cited by David Naylor, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981), p. 47.

⁹St. Louis Star, Special Supplement, 25 August 1926.

¹⁰"Ambassador Seats Are Most Costly in World," St. Louis Star, Special Supplement, 25 August 1926.

¹¹St. Louis Star, Special Supplement, 25 August 1926.

¹²Frank Hunter, "The History of Theater in St. Louis," St. Louis Globe-Democrat, 1 March 1964.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See attached.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Granite City, IL/MO

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

A 1 5 7 4 4 5 0 0 4 2 7 9 1 8 0
Zone Easting Northing

B
Zone Easting Northing

C

D

E

F

G

H

Verbal boundary description and justification

The Ambassador Theater Building is located in City Block 180 and fronts approximately 125 feet on Locust Street and approximately 160 feet along North Seventh Street.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By © 1982, Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc.

name/title ¹ Mary M. Stiritz, Research Associate

organization Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc. date 20 December 1982

street & number 706 Chestnut Street, Room 1217 telephone (314) 421-6474

city or town St. Louis, state MO 63101

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

 national X state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Director, Department of Natural Resources and
title State Historic Preservation Officer

date

For NPS use only

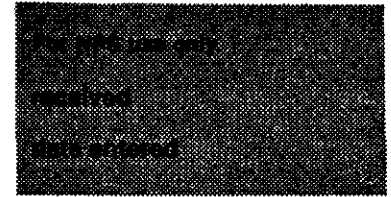
I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

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Continuation sheet Ambassador Theater Building Item number 9

Page 1

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St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2 January 1944; 23 October 1954; 17 September 1961; and 17 March 1964.

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Item number 11

Page 1

2. James M. Denny, Section Chief
Survey and Registration
Department of Natural Resources
Division of Parks & Historic Preservation
P.O. Box 176
Jefferson City

January 6, 1983
314/751-4096
Missouri 65102

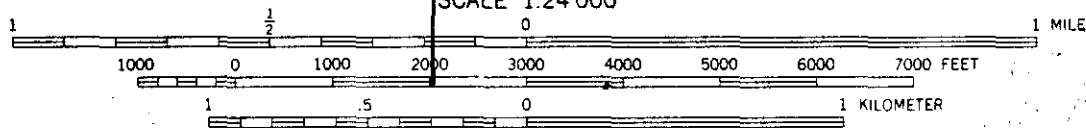
AMBASSADOR THEATER & BUILDING
411 North Seventh Street
St. Louis, Missouri

UTM Reference Points:

15/744500/4279180

Granite City, IL/MO Quadrangle
1:24,000 scale.

UTM GRID AND 1974 MAGNETIC NORTH
DECLINATION AT CENTER OF SHEET



CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET
DOTTED LINES REPRESENT 5-FOOT CONTOURS
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
FOR SALE BY U. S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, DENVER, COLORADO 80225, OR RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092
STATE GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, URBANA, ILLINOIS 61801.
AND BY THE DIVISION OF RESEARCH AND TECHNICAL INFORMATION
MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, ROLLA, MISSOURI 65401
A FOLDER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

AMBASSADOR THEATER BUILDING
411 North Seventh Street
St. Louis, Missouri

#1 of 4 South (Locust St.) and
east (Seventh St.) ele-
vations.

Photographer: Mary M. Stiritz
Date: October 1982
Negative: Landmarks Association
of St. Louis, Inc.

Camera facing northwest.

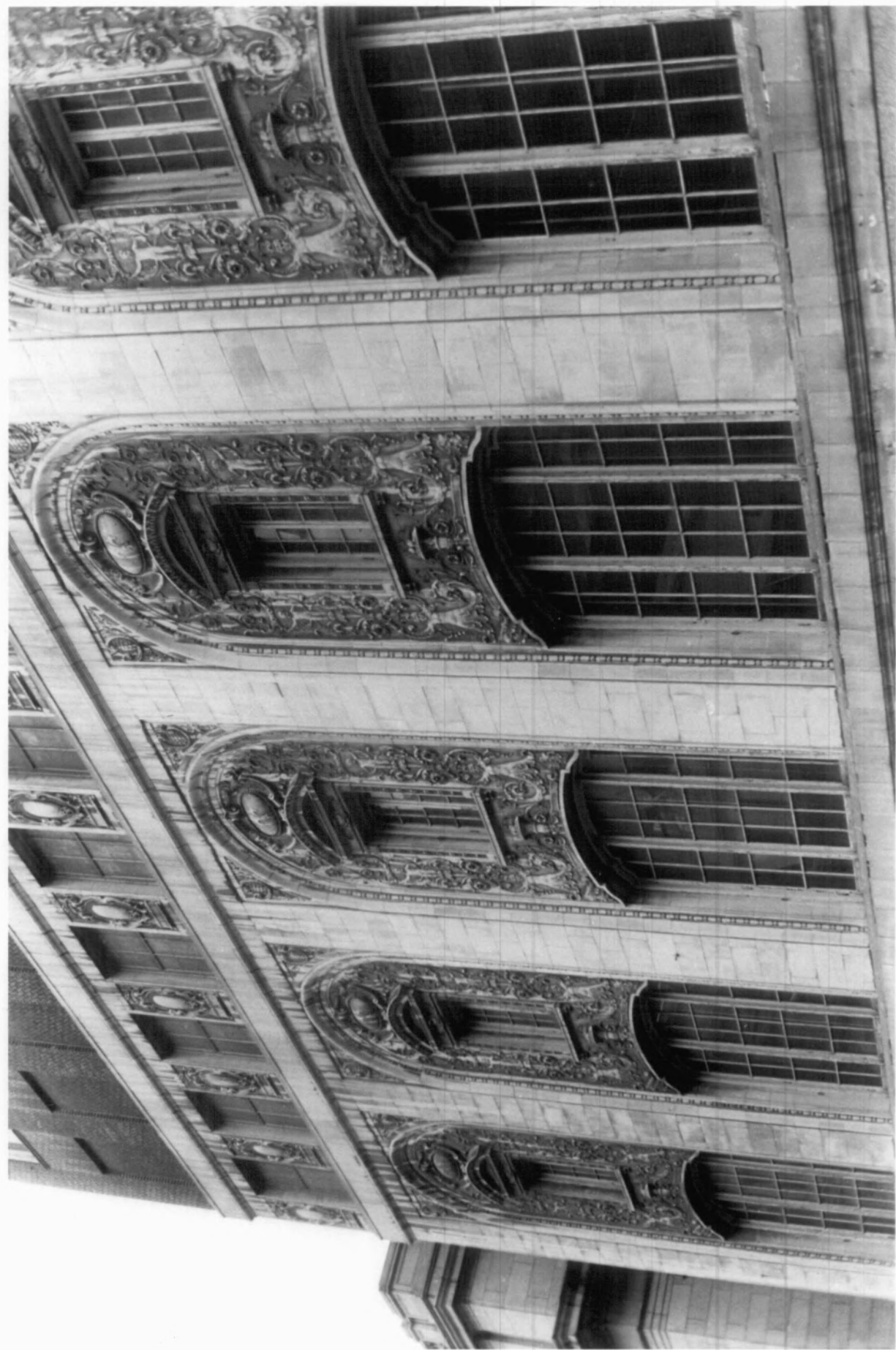


AMBASSADOR THEATER BUILDING
411 North Seventh Street
St. Louis, Missouri

#2 of 4 Detail of south elevation; balcony and mezzanine levels.

Photographer: Mary M. Stiritz
Date: October 1982
Negative: Landmarks Association
of St. Louis, Inc.

Camera facing northwest.



AMBASSADOR THEATER BUILDING
411 North Seventh Street
St. Louis, Missouri

#3 of 4 View of lobby from
mezzanine.

Photographer: Mary M. Stiritz
Date: November 1982
Negative: Landmarks Association
of St. Louis, INC.



AMBASSADOR THEATER BUILDING
411 North Seventh Street
St. Louis, Missouri

#4 of 4 View of auditorium.

Photographer: Unknown
Date: circa 1926
Negative: Landmarks Association
of St. Louis, Inc.

